

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 December 2009

Management Service. The health workers said the move will make it difficult to obtain salary increments and promotions.

The work-to-rule is expected to affect salaries and other payments to around 50,000 health sector workers.

## Indian bank workers stage nationwide strike

About 600,000 bank workers and executives held a national strike on December 16 to protest over the proposed merger of the Indore state bank with the State Bank of India. The normal functioning of many public and private sector banks were affected by the walkout.

The All India Bank Employees Association and All India Bank Officers' Association claimed the merger will cut jobs and undermine banking services for small and medium enterprises.

Despite privatisation policies pursued by successive Indian governments since 1991 and the entry of global and other private banks, the Indian public sector still controls about seventy percent of the country's banking.

## Tamil Nadu power workers demonstrate

Thousands of Tamil Nadu power workers held state-wide protests on December 15 as the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) government moved to split the state-owned Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) into separate power generation and transmission companies. The power workers claim that the policy will lead to increased electricity tariffs, job insecurity and adversely affect retired employees' pensions.

## Sri Lankan health sector workers work-to-rule

Around 2,000 health sector management assistants struck for two days on December 10 and imposed indefinite work-to-rule bans on December 14 over government plans to transfer their services into the State

## Sri Lankan power workers demonstrate

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) casual employees demonstrated in central Colombo on December 9 to demand that the government make them permanent employees. CEB casual workers are hired through manpower companies and paid a very low daily wage. According to the workers, CEB employs around 2,000 casuals as clerks, computer operators and meter readers. Workers have complained that they are not given any opportunity for promotion.

## Tea estate workers protest in Bangladesh

On December 8, more than 200 tea estate labourers formed a human chain in Sylhet city to protest the occupation of their central union office in Srimangal by government supporters. The tea workers later marched through the city before handing a memorandum to the Sylhet deputy commissioner demanding the return of their union.

The Bangladeshi tea industry has been in turmoil since a group of labour leaders, backed by sections of the government, forced out elected tea union officials and occupied their union office. Protest rallies and demonstrations are occurring in tea estates throughout the greater Sylhet region almost everyday. Bangladesh has over 160 tea estates with 140 in the Sylhet region.

## Korean government takes legal action against rail workers

Korean police arrested Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) head

Kim Ki-tae on December 13, accusing him of “disturbing” the state-run Korea Railroad (Korail) service by leading an illegal strike. Korail management has threatened to take disciplinary action against 12 union leaders and all KRWU members involved in the recent eight-day national rail strike. The company is also demanding compensation from the union.

A senior Korail spokesman said last week that the 11,700 striking unionists would be sorted into leaders and participants and disciplined accordingly. He declared that the company aimed to “create a new labor-management culture”.

The eight-day strike was called after the company broke a collective bargaining agreement with the union. Land transportation and maritime affairs minister, Chung Jong-hwan, told the media that the government was considering ways to reform the country’s railway system, including “cutting about 5,000 Korail workers, restructuring affiliate companies and outsourcing simple tasks”.

### **Qantas and Jetstar engineers escalate bans**

The Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia (APESMA) at Qantas and Jetstar stepped up existing industrial action this week over a pay and conditions agreement. However, APESMA senior industrial officer Alison Rose said the action, which includes bans on scheduled heavy maintenance for five business days from December 17, “won’t see flights cancelled or planes grounded”.

The engineers say that Qantas, after eight months of negotiations over pay and conditions, is refusing to discuss a new collective agreement or agree to fatigue-management demands or company-sponsored professional development.

The engineers, who have not had a pay increase since July 2008, want a 30 percent wage rise over three years but Qantas claims this is “unreasonable” and “excessive”. A key issue in the dispute is the airline’s out-of-hours work policies, which have led to serious cases of fatigue amongst engineers and pose real safety risks. APESMA members began industrial action in November, refusing to respond to call-outs on weekends and between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m. during weekdays.

### **Qantas baggage handlers in Sydney stop work**

Qantas international airport baggage handlers in Sydney stopped work for 40 minutes on December 16 as part of a long-running dispute over staffing and safety. Transport Workers Union members claim that many workers have been injured since Qantas cut up to 80 percent of its staff during the peak period and failed to uphold safety policies recommended by its own audits.

### **Queensland coal miners locked out**

The US mining giant Peabody Energy has locked out 240 miners at its North Goonyella mine since December 9. A Peabody Energy spokeswoman claimed the lockout was “employer protective action” and legal under the Labor government’s Fair Work Australia law, which took effect 1 July 2009. CFMEU and Peabody Energy were due to resume talks on December 16.

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members began protected industrial action in the form of two-hour work stoppages during every 12-hour shift from mid-November. The industrial action was over failed negotiations for a new collective work agreement. The previous agreement expired in March. Peabody Energy wants a radically changed work shift structure, which would negatively impact on pay. CFMEU members are concerned about fatigue and work safety and also have grievances about on-site housing.

### **Heinz workers remain locked out**

Some 70 Heinz workers remain locked out of the company’s Echuca factory in Victoria after implementing work bans on December 2 over a new work agreement. Operations have ceased at the factory, which produces baby food and cans of baked beans and spaghetti.

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members are protesting shift changes in a proposed work agreement that would cut shifts from 12 to 8 hours and reduce annual pay by \$7,500.

Heinz and the AWU resumed talks this week with the union indicating it was willing to accept eight-hour shifts, job losses and other demands if the company accepts a so-called union compromise. This includes payment of a 20 percent loading for the afternoon shift, all overtime paid at double time and a severance agreement for casuals.

### **New South Wales egg-grading workers strike**

About 19 National Union of Workers (NUW) members at Farm Pride Foods, one of Australia’s largest egg-graders, began an indefinite strike on December 14. They are picketing the company’s Dora Creek plant, north of Sydney, for a new work agreement. The Dora Creek egg-graders are paid \$17 per hour and want parity with their Victorian counterparts who receive \$23 an hour. NUW members are also concerned that some egg-graders have been employed for over 15 years but are still casual.

### **NSW government bus drivers strike**

Government bus drivers in Sydney and Newcastle defied a NSW Industrial Relations Commission recommendation not to strike and went ahead with a 24-hour walkout on December 18 to demand higher pay. Four thousand Sydney bus drivers participated in the strike, affecting over 600,000 commuters.

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) said six months of negotiations for a new work agreement had broken down and that the latest State Transit wage offer of 6 percent over two years was is “too little, too late”.

RTBU spokesman Raul Baonza said: “We’ve had a three-and-three offer before but there was an unacceptable clause to that, which was opening up the buses to casual drivers.” Drivers’ conditions were being eroded, he claimed, while State Transit made a profit of \$45 million and was receiving bonuses because drivers had achieved performance targets.

The union did not call any mass meetings of the striking drivers.

### **Western Australian waterside workers vote for strike**

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at the Esperance Port in Western Australia’s southern region and at metropolitan Fremantle this week voted overwhelmingly to take industrial action for up to two days in pursuit of a new three-year pay deal and to oppose plans by Esperance Port for roster changes.

Port of Esperance maritime workers have not had a pay increase since 2006 and their enterprise bargaining agreement has been in negotiation for 12 months. Wharfies are also outraged over Esperance Port Authority attempts to change rostering which would give workers only 24 hours’ notice of their next shift. Workers currently receive their rosters a month in advance.

Fremantle Port workers are also angry that only a quarter of the workforce has been offered a 20 percent pay rise over three years. They want the pay offer extended to the entire workforce.

### **New Zealand retail workers to hold “day of action”**

Some 1,800 National Distribution Union (NDU) members at retail giant The Warehouse will participate in a nation-wide “day of action” this Saturday, after talks between the company, the union and a government mediator for a new work agreement broke down last week. The NDU has not specified what action will be taken but it will be focused on Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch.

Workers previously rejected a proposed contract that would tie wage rises to the rate of inflation for the next three years but included “Project Invigorate”, a raft of restructuring proposals allowing the company to increase work shifts to 10 hours a day or 50 hours a week during peak periods without consultation.

The NDU has rejected the company’s latest offer, which included two

days’ extra sick leave and an additional bereavement leave day. An NDU official claimed the company was moving towards increased flexibility, casualisation and part-time hours.

### **Ministry of Justice pay dispute continues**

Over 1,700 Public Service Association (PSA) members at the New Zealand Ministry of Justice are continuing industrial action for a wage rise. Justice ministry staff are paid on average 6.3 percent less than the rest of the public service. Justice workers have held five strikes and imposed work-to-rule bans since October over a government proposal to freeze wages until July 2010 and then implement performance-based pay increases.

More than 100 National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) members at the Ministry of Justice recently followed a union leadership recommendation and accepted a \$750 one-off payment. NUPE spokesperson Les Bryce claimed the deal was “the best offer available within the ministry’s budgetary constraints”.

While PSA members are maintaining their campaign, PSA national secretary Brenda Pilott told the media that the government prepared to “work with the ministry to reduce their costs by finding ways of working more efficiently, identifying and eliminating wasteful spending and improving productivity”.



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